

Associated Press Newswires

Unusual Woodburn office helps indigenous Mexicans

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WOODBURN, Ore. (AP) - The boss refuses to pay me. My wife and kids are sick and don't speak English. We don't understand the law about pesticides in the fields.

For decades, Oregon farmworkers have raised these issues in Spanish. But what if the questions come in Mixteco, Triqui or Zapotec?

A small legal office in downtown Woodburn is offering an answer. The Indigenous Project, a new program run by the Oregon Law Center, is one of only a handful of places in the United States where indigenous farmworkers from Mexico and Central America can find free and confidential legal aid.

The project aims to reach the growing number of people who are following the agricultural migrant stream to Oregon but don't share the language and culture of the Spanish-speaking farmworker majority.

Julie Samples, a lawyer with the program, estimates the state's Mexican indigenous population at around 10,000 people, a dramatic increase compared to a decade ago. Most are from Oaxaca, a state of rugged mountains and extreme poverty in southern Mexico.

Samples, a 2001 graduate of Lewis & Clark Law School, spent the summer traveling to dozens of labor camps throughout the Willamette Valley to talk with workers about their legal rights. She says indigenous farmworkers, driven north by economic hardship, are more likely than Spanish-speakers to be denied wages or forced into substandard housing.

Most are Mixtecs, a people familiar with injustice toward Indians in their native country. The bias continues in the United States, sometimes from the larger Mexican mainstream.

"Most of them have never had a fair shake from the outside world," said Mark Wilk, director of the Oregon Law Center's Woodburn office. "They're not familiar with the Mexican or U.S. legal system."

Wilk says the indigenous program is at the same point where legal services were two decades ago for native Spanish speakers.

The team's office, in a heavily Hispanic area of downtown Woodburn, is a testament to the difficulty of reaching the indigenous community.

A sign on the front door indicates the building is "abierto," or open in Spanish. A coffee

table inside is stacked with copies of El Noticiero Legal, or The Legal News. But few materials are available in Mixteco or other indigenous tongues, in part because they barely exist in written form.

Instead, Samples is creating audio cassettes of legal information. She works with Valentin Sanchez, an Oaxaca native who speaks English, Spanish and Mixteco. They spend most of their time traveling to housing camps - few workers own cars - and setting up presentations in schools and community centers.

The project was modeled after a similar effort created in 1994 by California Rural Legal Assistance. Irma Luna, a community worker with that program, said it's not uncommon for indigenous laborers to perform piecework for 10 hours a day and be paid \$30 or less.

Studies in California show that most Mixtecs follow the tomato, lettuce and chile harvests from the Central Valley to the fruit and berry harvests of Oregon and Washington. Most are highly mobile, young and male. Language is often a major stumbling block for recent arrivals.

There have been a handful of high-profile cases in which indigenous workers were charged with crimes in Oregon and detained for lengthy periods due to communication barriers.

In the early 1990s, a Mixtec worker named Santiago Ventura Morales spent four years in an Oregon prison before his murder conviction was overturned.

Several years later, a migrant worker named Adolfo Ruiz-Alvarez was released from a state mental hospital after two years of psychiatric evaluations and drug treatments. He had been charged with trespassing and public indecency near Mount Angel, but didn't understand the interpreters who interviewed him in Spanish. A native of Oaxaca, he only spoke an Indian dialect called Triqui.

The majority of the cases in Woodburn today are far simpler. Common issues range from wage claims to poor working conditions to sexual harassment. Most are settled with a phone call or a letter threatening litigation.

Sanchez, the Indigenous Project's tri-lingual employee, said the number of Mixtecs has grown considerably since he arrived in Oregon in the late 1990s. He sees Mixtecs playing basketball, shopping in Woodburn grocery stores and speaking his language on public telephones.

A downtown shop called "El Oaxaqueo" offers a place where Mixteco speakers can find Oaxacan newspapers and beaded jewelry made by indigenous people. From behind the counter, employee David Lopez, who is Mixtec, can call out prices to customers in Mixteco, Spanish or English.

"I'm working on my fourth language now," said Lopez, referring to his Russian classes at

Woodburn High School.

Some Mixtec immigrants also have formed native groups, or hometown associations, that send money home for projects such as telephone lines or street paving. The informal associations select members at random to return home for periods of service - working as a volunteer mayor, for example, or town clerk.

Not all Oaxacans classify themselves as Indian. Some trace their ancestry to the influence of Spain.

The state of Oaxaca is the fourth most common source of students for Oregon public schools, which suggests a growing trend of indigenous people moving here.

The Oregon Law Center is one of a few legal groups that cater to farmworkers. The project is funded by a two-year, \$80,000 fellowship from the nonprofit Academy for Educational Development, along with grants of \$37,500 each from the Spirit Mountain Community Fund and the Campaign for Equal Justice, and a grant of \$12,500 from the PacifiCorp Foundation for Learning.

The money goes toward language resources, transportation and legal research. It also provides a salary for Samples, who speaks English and Spanish, and Sanchez, who also speaks Mixteco.

Legal Aid Services of Oregon runs a similar office in Woodburn next door to the Indigenous Project, but is restricted in the clients it serves - usually workers with legal documents only - because it receives federal funding.

Nargess Shadbeh, director of the Oregon Law Center's farmworker program, said the Indigenous Project will continue into the future if more funding can be raised. The center has applied for several grants since the first fellowship was awarded to Samples in August 2001.